

# Zoning Code: Sign Requirements

## 20A



A DDES Customer Information Bulletin



King County Department of Development and Environmental Services  
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<http://www.metrokc.gov/ddes/>

## Frequently Asked Questions

King County DDES has created customer information bulletins to inform the general public about the effect of codes and regulations on their projects. These bulletins are not intended to be complete statements of all laws and rules and should not be used as substitutes for them. If conflicts and questions arise, current codes and regulations are the final authority. Because the codes and regulations may be revised or amended at any time, consult King County staff to be sure you understand all requirements before beginning work. It is the applicant's responsibility to ensure that each project meets all requirements of applicable codes and regulations.

This bulletin explains the requirements for acquiring a permit to place signs and billboards in King County as provided in Chapter 21A.20 and other associated chapters of the King County Zoning Code. It is not intended to be a substitute for the information in the King County Zoning Code chapter on signs (codified as Title 21A of the King County Code [KCC]), but rather to serve as an introduction to the regulations.

### What is the purpose of sign regulations?

King County regulates the type, number, location, size, and lighting of signs to ensure a balance in the visual environment of the County. While the County recognizes that the purpose of signs is to identify businesses and/or promote products and services to generate business, the County also knows that traffic safety, economic welfare, and aesthetic harmony must be considered. All applications for sign permits are, therefore, reviewed for compliance with the King County Zoning Code as well as the Uniform Building Code (UBC).

### How does the Zoning Code define a sign?

As defined in KCC 21A.06.1085, a sign is “any device, structure, fixture or placard that is visible from a public right-of-way or surrounding properties and uses graphics, symbols or written copy for the purpose of advertising or identifying any establishment, product, goods or service.”

## Frequently Asked Questions

The following lists the signs that are regulated by the Zoning Code and defined in KCC Chapter 21A.06:

- ◆awning
- ◆changing message center
- ◆community bulletin board
- ◆directional
- ◆freestanding
- ◆fuel price
- ◆identification
- ◆incidental
- ◆indirectly illuminated
- ◆monument
- ◆off-premise directional
- ◆on-premise
- ◆permanent residential development
- ◆portable
- ◆projecting
- ◆wall

## When is a Sign Permit required?

Permits are required whenever you are erecting, altering, or relocating signs, as defined in the King County Code, with the exception of those signs listed as “exempt” in KCC 21A.20.030. Such exempt signs are also referenced below.

## What do I have to do to apply for a Sign Permit?

To apply for a sign permit, come to the Permit Center at the Building Services Division of the King County Department of Development and Environmental Services (DDes). As part of the application process, you must submit materials that are required in addition to the application form. These materials are listed in this bulletin under “Checklist for Complete Application for Sign Permits.”

When applying for a sign permit, you will have to know the zoning district for the area where the sign will be posted or built. Each zone has different restrictions and regulations regarding wall or freestanding signs and illumination. (Refer to KCC Chapters 21A.04, 21A.12, 21A.14, and 21A.20 for further details.) For example, if your sign is to be located in a residential zone, you will have to review the requirements and limitations that zone places for the type of sign you are proposing. (See KCC 21A.20.080.)

When planning your sign, you will also have to calculate the area required for the sign in order to adhere to sign requirements provided in KCC Chapter 21A.20. Depending on the type of sign (freestanding, wall, etc.), the sign area will be calculated differently. (See KCC 21A.20.050 for information on how to calculate the area of your sign.)

## What types of signs are exempt from the zoning regulations?

The following signs or displays are exempt from the regulations in KCC Chapter 21A.20:

- ◆Historic site markers or plaques, gravestones, and address numbers
- ◆Signs required by law, for example:
  - official or legal notices issued and posted by any public agency or court
  - traffic directional or warning signs
- ◆Plaques, tablets, or inscriptions indicating the name of a building, date of erection, or other commemorative information, if they meet the following criteria:
  - they are an integral part of the building structure or are attached flat to the face of the building
  - they are nonilluminated
  - they do not exceed four square feet in surface area

## Frequently Asked Questions

◆ Incidental signs, if they do not exceed two square feet in surface area (Note: This sign requirement does not apply to signs that provide directions, warnings, or other similar information and that are established and maintained by a public agency.) As defined in KCC 21A.06.120, an incidental sign is “a sign, emblem or decal designated to inform the public of goods, facilities or services available on the premises,” and includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- |                          |                                   |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| –restrooms               | –property ownership or management |
| –hours of operation      | –phone booths                     |
| –acceptable credit cards | –recycling containers             |

◆ State or federal flags

◆ Religious symbols

◆ The flag of a commercial institution (Note: No more than one flag is permitted per business premises, and the flag must not exceed 20 square feet in surface area.)

**Note:** Even though the signs identified above may be exempt from the regulations in KCC Chapter 21A.20, they must still comply with the UBC and may require a building permit.

## Which kinds of signs are prohibited?

The following signs or displays are prohibited, except where indicated otherwise in KCC Chapter 21A.20:

- ◆ Portable signs such as sandwich/A-frame signs and mobile readerboard signs
- ◆ Private signs on utility poles
- ◆ Signs that may be confused with traffic control signs or signals (because of their size, location, movement, content, coloring, or manner of illumination)
- ◆ Signs located in the public right-of-way, except where permitted in KCC Chapter 21A.20
- ◆ Posters, pennants, strings of lights, blinking lights, balloons, search lights, and other displays of a carnival nature, except signs of an architectural nature, or on a limited basis (such as seasonal decorations, or grand opening displays, per KCC 21A.20.120)
- ◆ Changing message center signs, where the message changes more frequently than every three minutes

## What general requirements pertain to signs?

All signs must be on-premise signs (except billboards, community bulletin boards, political signs, real estate signs, and special event signs). If the lot is located in a business, office, and/or industrial zone and does not have public street frontage, one off-premise directional sign is permitted, if it is no more than 16 square feet.

The location for signs (setback from property lines) is determined by KCC Chapter 21A.12 (Development Standards–Density and Dimensions).

Fuel price signs are not included in sign area or number limitations in KCC 21A.20.090, .100–.110 (provided the signs do not exceed 20 square feet per street frontage).

Projecting and awning signs are not permitted for uses in resource and residential zones. In other zones, however, they may be used instead of wall signs if they meet the requirements stated in KCC 21A.20.060.C.

## Frequently Asked Questions

Changing message center signs and time and temperature signs, whether wall signs or freestanding, must not exceed the size permitted for any wall or freestanding sign. They are permitted only in zones NB, CB, RB, O, and I, and they must not exceed the maximum size height permitted in the specific zone.

Directional signs are not included in the sign area or number limitation of KCC 21A.20.070–110. They must not exceed six square feet in surface area and are limited to one sign for each entrance or exit to surface parking areas or parking structures.

Sign illumination and glare requirements vary, depending on the zone. (See KCC 21A.20.060.)

Maximum height for wall signs must not extend above the highest exterior wall upon which the sign is located.

Off-premise directional signs must not exceed four square feet in sign area, except as otherwise permitted by KCC Chapter 21A.20.

In mixed use developments in the NB, CB, RB, or O zones, one permanent residential identification is permitted, as long as it does not exceed 32 feet, and it meets the maximum sign area requirements in the zone where the mixed use development is located.

All signs must meet the sight distance requirements of KCC 21A.12.210, except for traffic control signs. A sight distance triangle area must contain no signs between 42 inches and eight feet above the existing street grade. See the Site Distance Triangle on the following page. The site distance applies to all intersections and site access points and is measured as shown in the Site Distance Triangle (top view).

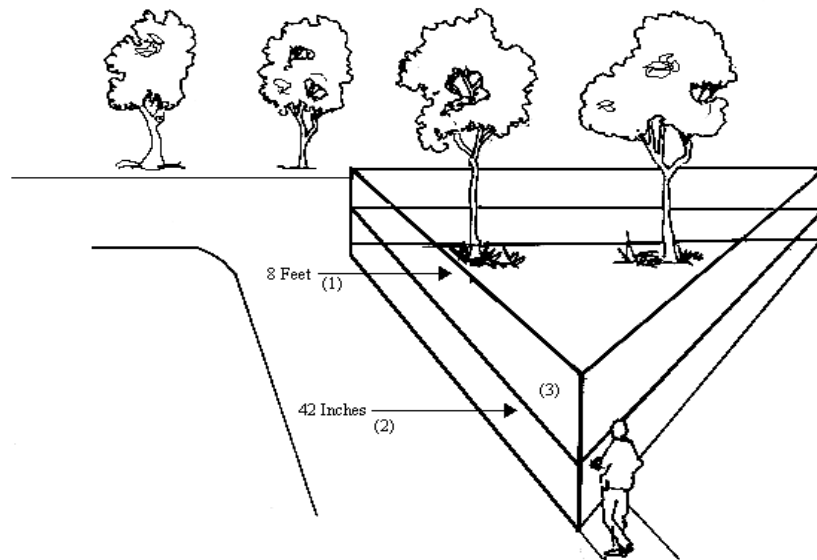
## What additional materials do I need when I apply for my sign permit?

To apply for a sign permit you will have to submit materials other than just the permit application form. These additional materials are listed in the following “Checklist for Complete Application for Sign Permits.” This checklist should help you gather the information you will need for a complete permit application package.

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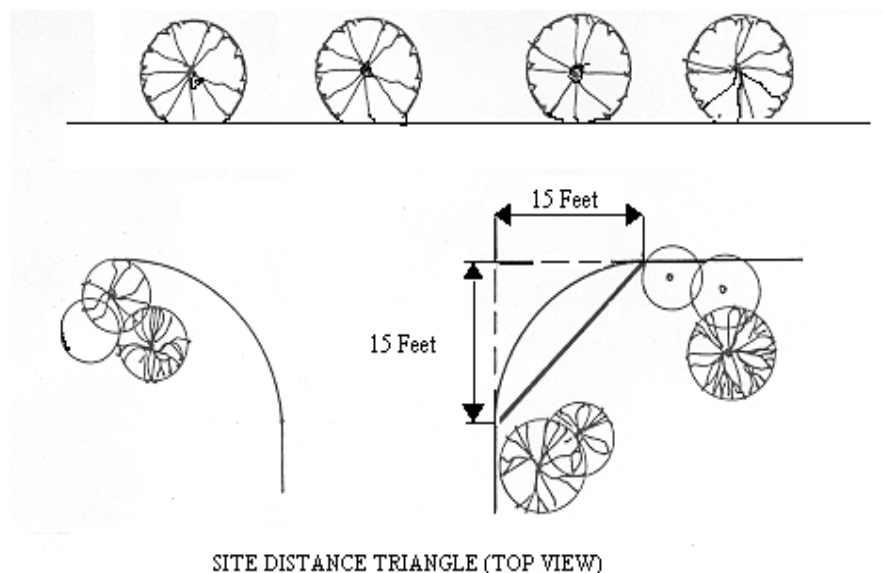
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## Frequently Asked Questions



- (1) Trees, overhangs, eaves cannot extend below 8 feet
- (2) Hedges, shrubs, retaining walls, fences -- maximum 42 inches high
- (3) Open, unobstructed area

## Site Distance Triangle



## Frequently Asked Questions

### Checklist for Complete Application for Sign Permits

The following checklist is for application purposes only and is not intended to replace or duplicate any requirements set forth in King County Codes. All sign permit applications must be accompanied by the following documents:

#### A. Certification of Applicant Status or Certification of Transfer of Applicant Status

The King County Council passed Ordinance 11700 to clarify who the applicant is for a project, since the applicant is not always the property owner. The purpose of the Certification of Applicant Status form is to ensure that the property owner is aware that an application has been made to develop his/her property and to document the identity of the legal applicant, as well as any consultants. The legal applicant is the individual or entity authorized to receive plans and correspondence from King County. When the applicant is not the property owner, a Certification and Transfer of Applicant Status form is used to transfer applicant status to an agent, when authorized by the legal property owner.

#### B. Affidavit for Application

The purpose of the Affidavit for Application is to establish the scope of work, who the property owner and/or agent is, and whether the site is in compliance with sensitive area requirements. The name, address, and telephone number of the owner and the applicant (if different from the owner) are required on the form. It is important to have accurate information recorded so these parties may be contacted when questions arise, and the applicant may be notified when the permit is ready to be picked up.

#### C. Contractor's Registration Number

Washington State law requires contractors to be licensed with the state. When selecting a contractor, please refer to Bulletin 6, ***Working with Contractors***, for more details.

#### D. Property Tax Account Number

The property tax account number is an identifying number (commonly known as the “parcel number”), which is assigned by the Assessor's Office. DDES uses the number to verify that taxes have been paid. **NO PERMIT MAY BE ISSUED UNLESS TAXES ARE CURRENT.**

#### E. Complete Legal Description of the Property

The complete legal description of the property describes the parcel of land identified by the property tax account number (or parcel number). It should describe what is known as a “separate lot” and should be identical to the parcel as found on Assessor's maps and on the required plot plans. See Bulletin 2, *Separate Lot*, for more information. It is also acceptable to submit a legal description of the parcel as it appears on deeds, real estate contracts, and statutory warranty deeds, or as it appears on the information at the Assessor's Office.

The legal description is used to check the dimensions of a parcel, the uses allowed by the current zoning and any underlying restrictions (such as setbacks from property lines or from easements, lot coverage, or height of buildings). The legal description is also used to check for sensitive areas and other planning controls. (Note: For projects with multiple parcels, please list each parcel number with its corresponding legal description.)

## Frequently Asked Questions

### Are there specific requirements for signs in each zone district?

Each zone district has its own requirements and restrictions for the types of signs that are permitted. For example, community bulletin board signs are permitted in several zones, but the requirements vary. The requirements are most restrictive in zones R, UR, RA zones; less restrictive in zones O and NB; and even less so in zones CB and I; with the least restrictions in zone RB. (See KCC 21A.20.065.)

Signs in zones A, F, and M (within the resource zone district) are limited to one residential identification sign and one additional sign, with specific sign area requirements. Freestanding signs have height restrictions and require setbacks. (See KCC 21A.20.70).

The requirements and restrictions for signs in other zones vary with regard to limitations in size, locations, setbacks, number of signs allowed on the same property, illuminations, and freestanding versus wall-mounted options.

For the requirements and restrictions placed on signs in the regional business (RB) zone, refer to KCC 21A.20.110.

### What is required for temporary signs?

Signs that will be displayed for a limited duration are permitted, with some restrictions. (See KCC 21A.20.120 for a list of temporary signs and their restrictions.) Temporary signs do not require building permits, unless specified in the UBC or in KCC Chapter 21A.20. The time allowed for display of the sign varies according to the type of sign. Examples of signs that do not require building permits, and the time period allowed for their display, include the following:

- ◆ Grand opening displays (such as signs, posters, pennants, strings of lights, blinking lights, balloons, and searchlights) that announce the opening of a new enterprise or the opening of an enterprise under new management are allowed for up to one month.
- ◆ Construction signs (see definition, examples, and restrictions in KCC 21A.20.120) must be removed by the date of first occupancy of the premises, or one year after placement of the sign, whichever comes first.
- ◆ Political signs (promoting candidates or issues for election, see KCC 21A.20.120 for restrictions) must be removed within 10 days following the election.
- ◆ Real estate signs (most) vary in time duration for display and restrictions, depending on the sign. (Note: A permit is required for some types of real estate signs.)
- ◆ Community event signs (for nonprofit sponsored community fairs, festivals, or events) may be displayed for the time period specified in the temporary use permit and must be removed (by the event sponsor) within two weeks following the end of the community event.

### What special requirements pertain to billboards?

A billboard, as defined in KCC 21A.06.100 is a “sign used principally for advertising a business activity, use product, or service unrelated to the primary use or activity of the property on which the billboard is located.” The billboard includes both the supporting structural framework and attached billboard faces. Off-premise directional or temporary real estate signs are excluded from this definition.

## Frequently Asked Questions

Billboards are subject to different regulations and limitations regarding number, location, height, alteration, and general requirements and restrictions. They are prohibited in some zones and restricted in others. (See KCC 21A.20.130–180 for details.)

KCC 21A.20.170 contains special restrictions regarding “view and vegetative screening protections” pertaining to billboards. For example, your billboard is not allowed to block a direct view of Mt. Rainier or the Olympic Mountains. Billboard owners or agents also are prohibited from removing any vegetative screening on public property or private landscaping that is required by code as a condition of a permit.

If you still have questions regarding sign permits after reading this bulletin, please refer to the other bulletins listed below or contact the information desk at DDES at 206-296-6600.

## Other bulletins and telephone numbers that may be helpful

Bulletin 1	Building and Development Permit Telephone Numbers
Bulletin 7	Mobile Home Permits
Bulletin 8	Commercial and Multi-family Building Permits
Bulletin 9	Obtaining a Residential Building Permit
Bulletin 11	Street Addresses and Road Names
Bulletin 12	The Residential Building Permit Process
Bulletin 17A	ZoningCode: Overview and Summary
Bulletin 18A	Zoning Code: Permitted Use Tables
206-296-6600	DDES Permit Center
206-296-6655	DDES Zoning Information



King County complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). If you require an accommodation to attend a meeting (two weeks' notice) or require this information in Braille, audiocassette, or large print, please call 206-296-6693 or TTY 206-296-7217.